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### THE ARGONAUT LEGEND IN EARLY GREEK POETRY

The story of the Argonauts' expedition to a distant land to acquire the Golden Fleece is one of the most famous of Greek myths. The oldest surviving connected narrative account of it appears in Pindar's Fourth Pythian Ode, composed in 462 BCE. But there are many allusions to it in earlier poets – the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Hesiod and the pseudo-Hesiodica, Mimnermus, Simonides – which confirm the currency of the myth by 700 BCE at the latest. I shall argue that it was much older.

Let us begin with the Homeric references. In three places in the *Iliad* (7. 467-9, 21. 40 f., 23. 746 f.) we hear of Jason's son Euneos, born to Hypsipyle on Lemnos: this union of Jason and Hypsipyle was always treated as an episode of the Argonautic expedition. The poet of the *Odyssey* (12. 69-72) mentions the Argo itself and how it succeeded, with Hera's help, in getting past the Clashing Rocks on its way home from Aietes. The reference to Hera's assistance implies a narrative with divine machinery, which points to an epic treatment. This old epic Argonautica was evidently the source from which the *Odyssey* poet knew of the Clashing Rocks. In fact, as many scholars since Kirchhoff have argued, he appears to have borrowed several adventures and motifs from the same source and transferred them to Odysseus.<sup>1</sup> They include the Sirens, of whom I shall say more later, and Circe the sister of Aietes.

Hesiod in his catalogue of the world's major rivers (*Th.* 338-45) includes the Phasis; this was a mythical stream known only in connection with the Argo story. There are more explicit references to the myth towards the end of the *Theogony* (956-62, 992-1002), and many allusions to the subject matter in

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<sup>1</sup> See M. L. West, *Odyssey and Argonautica*, *Classical Quarterly* 55, 2005, 39-64.

fragments from other Hesiodic poems.<sup>2</sup> The seventh-century elegist Mimnermus devoted several lines to Jason's recovery of the Fleece from the ends of the earth (frs. 11–11a W.). Clearly the story was widely known by this time. We can assume that epic was the primary genre in which it was current.

We know of several epic poems of archaic or classical date in which the myth was treated. But none of these can have been early enough to be the source for the Homeric poets. The story was at least touched on (and developed) in the *Korinthiaka* attributed to Eumelos (frs. 17, 20–3 W.); this poem, however, cannot be dated earlier than the mid sixth century.<sup>3</sup> There was an ample account of the Argonauts' voyage in the *Naupaktika* attributed to Carcinus (*Carmen Naupactium* frs. 3–9 W.), but this too reflected a Corinthian or Corinthian-colonial elaboration of the legend, in which Jason moved to Corcyra after the death of Pelias. Then there is record of a poem in 6, 500 lines on 'the building of the Argo and Jason's voyage to Colchis' ascribed to Epimenides (Diog. Laert. 1. 111 = DK 3 A 1). In this poem, as in pseudo-Eumelos, Helios' son Aietes was a native of Corinth. So here again we are looking at a secondary version, not an original source; in general the ascription of poetry to the semi-legendary seer Epimenides seems to have begun in the fifth century.<sup>4</sup> So none of these attested poems represented the archetypal account of the legend. Hesiod and the poets of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* must have known an older Argonautic epic or epics that existed only in oral form, or, if they were ever fixed in writing, they disappeared before the Hellenistic age.

I have recently analysed the relationship between the *Odyssey* and its Argonautic source, and tried to show that the topography of the Argonautic poem related to a northerly sector of the Black Sea from the Crimea to the Straits of Kerch and the Sea of Azov.<sup>5</sup> If my argument is accepted, the poem must have been composed at a time when that sector was the frontier zone of Greek exploration, tentatively prospected but not yet colonized. We should probably think of the mid part of the seventh century as the time when this area was being sporadically traversed, and when rumours of what it contained were coming back to Greece. That should be the date of the Argonautic poem. The mythical Aia was not yet located at Colchis; it will have lain at the eastern extremity of that northern zone, the Phasis being perhaps identified

<sup>2</sup> *Catalogue of Women*, frs. 38, 40, 63, 241 M.-W.; *Megalai Ehoiai*, frs. 253-5; *Keykos gamos*, fr. 263; *Aigimios*, fr. 299.

<sup>3</sup> See M. L. West, "Eumelos": *A Corinthian Epic Cycle?*, *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 122, 2002, 109-33, at 130 f.

<sup>4</sup> M. L. West, *The Orphic Poems*, Oxford 1983, 45–53.

<sup>5</sup> See n. 1.

with the Tanais.<sup>6</sup> The Colchian localization is first attested in the sixth-century pseudo-Eumelos (fr. 17. 8 W.), after the date of the Greek settlement in Colchis.

The seventh-century Argonautica will not have been the first epic on the subject. The legend may go back much further. How much further? Can we identify a particular historical period favourable to the development of such a story? If we reduce it to its basic scheme, a quest by a band of companions for a treasure located in a distant land and guarded by a sleepless dragon – a quest that succeeds thanks to the help of the local king's daughter, who falls in love with the leading hero – then it appears as a timeless *Märchen* complex that could have originated at any period. But if we take into consideration the circumstantial details that characterize the Greek myth, the question is not quite so open. The heroes set forth from the northern city of Iolkos. Their leader, Jason, is a claimant to the throne, which has been occupied by Pelias, the brother of Neleus and uncle of Nestor. So the story is anchored in a wider mythological framework. It is part of what we may call the Thessalian epic cycle of saga poetry centred on the Mycenaean capital of Iolkos and featuring heroes such as Pelias, Peleus, and Achilles. This poetry looked back to the late Mycenaean age, the period before the sack of Iolkos, which archaeologists date to sometime in the twelfth century. In the century or so following that event the poetic traditions relating to that region will have taken shape among the Aeolian Greeks of Thessaly.

The Argonauts' voyage is also anchored, at least in part, on the geography of the real world. From Iolkos they sail across the north Aegean by way of Lemnos, up through the Bosphoros, and out into the greater sea beyond. At the same time as their saga poetry was taking shape, the Aeolian Greeks of Thessaly were raiding and settling the coastal regions of north-west Anatolia. Then, if not before, they must have become familiar with the Hellespont; they must have sailed up the Bosphoros and found that it gave access to a vast open sea stretching away to the north and east, to unknown regions. For mariners of the north Aegean this was the natural direction in which to situate the fabulous land of the Golden Fleece and the voyage that took the Argonauts to many strange places and adventures. To this period, then, say between 1150 and 1000, we may plausibly date, not the origin of the *Märchen* complex itself, but the framing of that particular form of the legend in which the adventurers were led by Jason at the behest of Pelias and in which their goal lay somewhere out in the east, beyond the Bosphoros.

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<sup>6</sup> As it still was in the fifth century by the author of the *Prometheus* trilogy. Cf. U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Aischylos. Interpretationen*, Berlin 1916, 152 f.; J. D. P. Bolton, *Aristeas of Proconnesus*, Oxford 1962, 56-8.

There is another argument for the antiquity of the myth. The name of the Phasis, the river of that land of the sunrise where the sun's rays are stored in a golden chamber by Oceanus' rim (Mimnermus fr. 11a) and where Helios' children Aietes and Circe live, has a clear and simple Greek etymology: it means 'shiner', from the old root verb *bhā-* 'shine', which was used especially in connection with the dawn.<sup>7</sup> Φᾶσις corresponds exactly in form to the Sanskrit noun *bhātis* 'shining, lustre', except that it is masculine, with the *-tis* suffix making a *nomen agentis*.<sup>8</sup> This is evidently an archaic formation that must have been created several centuries before Homer. It may be conjectured that in the original myth Phasis took the place of Oceanus itself as the river from which the sun rose.

One of the dangers that the Argonauts had to overcome was the seductive singing of the Sirens. The Sirens of course also appear in the *Odyssey*, as a threat to Odysseus and his men. It is very probable that this is one of the motifs that the poet of the *Odyssey* borrowed from the Argonaut story. The Argonauts countered the danger by a means not available to Odysseus. They had on board a marvellous singer of their own, and when they came within earshot of the Sirens he took up his lyre and sang better than they did, so that the Argonauts were not tempted to land on the Sirens' shore. The episode is related by Apollonius Rhodius (4. 891–919), but it certainly goes back to much earlier versions of the myth.

The Argonauts' singer is usually identified as Orpheus. The evidence that he was one of the Argonauts goes back to at least the middle of the sixth century. According to the mythographer Herodorus of Heraclea, who wrote around 400 BCE (*FGrHist* 31 F 43 = fr. 43 Fowler), it was in order to counter the Sirens that Orpheus was included in the company: the wise Centaur Chiron told Jason to take Orpheus with him for that precise contingency. As Meuli saw, the Argo legend had the pattern of what he calls the *Helfermärchen*, the type of story in which a band of people embark on a dangerous journey or quest, having among them certain individuals with exceptional abilities, and each of these individuals enables the company to overcome a particular danger.<sup>9</sup> Orpheus' inclusion among the Argonauts fits this pattern.

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<sup>7</sup> *Od.* 14. 502 φάε δὲ χρυσόθρονος Ἥως, and in Indo-Iranian; see M. L. West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, Oxford 2007, 219.

<sup>8</sup> As in μάντις. See C. D. Buck and W. Petersen, *A Reverse Index of Greek Nouns and Adjectives*, Chicago 1949, 574.

<sup>9</sup> K. Meuli, *Odyssee und Argonautika*, Berlin 1921, 1-24 = *Gesammelte Schriften*, Basel 1975, ii, 593-610.

How old is the episode of Orpheus and the Sirens? The direct evidence, as I say, begins in the sixth century. But if the poet of the *Odyssey* borrowed the Sirens from the older Argonautica that he knew, that takes them back at least a century earlier. It may seem bold to suggest that Orpheus appeared in a pre-Homeric Argonautica, because we have no evidence for his existence in any connection before the sixth century. When he does appear, however, he appears first in the role of Argonaut. He is shown, labelled with his name, on a sculptured metope from the Sicyonian Treasury at Delphi, dating from around 570 BCE, standing in a ship which is generally recognized to be the Argo.<sup>10</sup> He appeared with the Argonauts also in pseudo-Eumelos (fr. 22\* West). The earlier allusions to the Argo legend in Hesiod, Mimnermus, and the *Odyssey*, are so brief that we could not expect Orpheus to be mentioned in them. When Circe warns Odysseus about the Sirens, she does not even mention the Argo, as she does in the case of the Clashing Rocks. She could not conveniently have done so, for if she had told him that the Argonauts got past the Sirens safely, she would have had to explain too that they had achieved this because they had an expert singer with them, and that information would have been of no use to Odysseus. So I think it is perfectly possible, even likely, that Orpheus was already present in the pre-Homeric version of the Argonaut legend.

Indeed I see no reason why he should not have played his part in the story from the beginning. The Thracian music-maker, the grandson of Pieros, should have been at home originally, like the Pierian or Olympian Muses themselves, in that north Greek poetic tradition, to be carried from there across the sea to Lesbos, where Orpheus' severed but prophetic head was later said to be located. And there is another thing that points to his antiquity. I have already referred to the archaic formation of the name Phasis as evidence of the early origins of the Argo legend. Orpheus' name too is of an archaic sort. Names in -εῦς, genitive -ῆος, are an old type, found in the Linear B tablets, common with Homeric heroes (Achilleus, Odysseus, Peleus, Neleus, Tydeus, Atreus, and others), but no longer productive in the historical period. Names of this form were not still being created in the seventh or sixth century. Orpheus must have been celebrated much earlier – and probably as an Argonaut.

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<sup>10</sup> *Fouilles de Delphes* 4, pl. 4; *LIMC* Argonautai no. 2 = Orpheus no. 6; cf. West (as n. 1), 46.